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Leading in a Culture of Change

by Michael Fullan
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Focus

Take-Aways

• Society is getting more complicated, and change is accelerating.

• Leaders must act promptly but not hastily.

• Charismatic leadership may hurt rather than help.

• Leaders should aim to improve people's lives.

• Leaders must often disturb social organisms, such as companies or schools.

• The effort to lead change begins with individual relationships.

• Leaders should foster the creation and sharing of knowledge through the social relationships in an organization.

• Businesses and schools have more in common than meets the eye; in fact, in many ways, schools are tougher to manage than businesses.

• Leaders must be present throughout the organization, not just at the top.

• "Slow knowing" is the best way to deal with ambiguous, uncertain situations.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
7	8	6	6

Relevance

What You Will Learn
In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) What five elements all theories of good leadership have in common; 2) Why leading in a time of profound change depends on relationships; and 3) Why knowledge is social.

Recommendation
This book by a prominent educator is readable. That may sound like faint praise, but it isn't at all. Michael Fullan is a university dean, and as such is a full-fledged member of the fraternity of educators. Yet he has not written in educator-ese, that impenetrable, opaque jargon familiar to anyone who has trudged through books on education. His approach to leadership is useful and realistic, with sections on moral purpose, relationships, knowledge sharing and change. Fullan does not set out to break new ground. Instead, he includes a good deal of information he has gathered from other researchers. Occasionally his compendium of useful ideas feels a tad disjointed, but generally, he presents his selections in a logical sequence that leads you to his main conclusion: business leaders have a lot to learn from pioneering school system managers. *getAbstract* recommends this book to school administrators, business executives and managers who are looking for guidance during organizational transitions.

Abstract

A New Convergence
Social change is constant, unpredictable and nonlinear. The dilemma confronting the leader is as clear as it is daunting:

- Fail to act quickly in response to change and you face extinction.
- Act too quickly and you risk making fatally bad decisions.

Fortunately, researchers today know more about leadership than in the past. They have accumulated a vast amount of broad and deep data, and can draw on leaders' experiences in an array of institutions that are as superficially dissimilar as businesses and schools. Both must become "learning organizations" that respond constructively to new situations.

Change is both positive and negative. On the one hand, change can be exciting and exhilarating; on the other, it's risky and dangerous. Leaders must help followers walk the tightrope between exhilaration and fear. Some leaders manage this through their personal charisma, which attracts people who will follow them eagerly through wrenching change. Yet charisma is a mixed blessing. A brief period of euphoria among the followers may give way to a long, discouraging stretch of dependency.

The Five Elements of Leadership
People ask a lot of their leaders – perhaps too much. Leaders must solve problems, make sense of irrational situations, treat special interests fairly, and discern true, relevant and necessary information from irrelevant, misleading and redundant noise. However, despite the complexity of leadership, all theories about how to be a good leader generally come down to five mutually reinforcing elements:

"Leadership, if it is to be effective, has to: (1) have an explicit 'making-a-difference' sense of purpose; (2) use strategies that mobilize many people to tackle tough problems; (3) be held accountable by measurable indicators; and (4) be ultimately assessed by the extent to which it awakens people's intrinsic commitment."

1. "Moral purpose" – Leaders choose to act. They wish to improve the lives of all stakeholders and even the whole society. Leaders with a true sense of moral purpose always seem to be in a rush. They feel that the stakes are high and their commitment is essential.
2. "Understanding change" – Experienced leaders know how to make trade-offs. They perform a difficult balancing act between deliberation and haste, and between pressuring their followers to perform and providing supportive encouragement.
3. "Relationships, relationships, relationships" – The bonds among people are the core of leadership. Leaders must build and deploy numerous broad and deep networks.
4. "Knowledge building" – Research on sharing knowledge indicates that the first three elements of leadership – moral purpose, understanding and relationships – are pivotal to the creation and sharing of knowledge. Transforming data into knowledge is a social process, not an individual one.
5. "Coherence making" – Ambiguity can fuel creativity, so leaders need to be able to tolerate it. Yet they must also be able to create enough coherence so that followers do not lose their bearings.

In addition, the best leaders have personalities that are rich in "energy – enthusiasm – hopefulness," traits they communicate to their followers.

"Moral Purpose"

"Moral purpose" is not simply about goals. It is about the routes you take to your goals. The end does not justify the means; rather, the means must share in the dignity of the moral purpose. This requirement introduces complexity into the subject of "moral purpose." Leaders are not saints. Altruism and ego mingle in their characters. Yet because the five elements of leadership are mutually reinforcing and mutually dependent, good leaders naturally behave with moral purpose. You can't develop any one leadership element without developing the others.

Focusing on "moral purpose" is particularly challenging in a complex world where you must often choose among mutually exclusive good ends. Moreover, you must learn to deal with the diverse objectives, interests and aspirations of various groups of followers. A good leader must:

- Make the purpose explicit and capture the moral high ground.
- Mobilize and motivate followers to undertake hard jobs.
- Face accountability according to clear metrics.
- Define success not merely as eliciting compliance but as inspiring commitment.

Two case studies, one from the field of education and one from business, illustrate moral purpose at work in all its complexity:

- National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NLNS) – In 1997, the newly elected British government set an ambitious agenda for improving education. The secretary of state put his job on the line by promising to resign if the efforts fell short of the targets. Clearly, the objective of improving literacy and numeracy was highly moral, and would make a positive difference throughout society. The leaders stated their goals and established a detailed plan for achieving them. Of course, the leaders' motives were not entirely pure. They hoped to win re-election and maintain themselves in power. And, some of the educators who helped implement the program may just have been going through the motions rather than acting out of heartfelt commitment.

- <u>Monsanto</u> – CEO Robert Shapiro transformed Monsanto from a chemical company into a biotechnology company, in large part by pointing out the great moral good the company could accomplish by improving food production and health for millions of people throughout the world. While Shapiro succeeded in transforming the corporation, he admitted later that he did not pay enough attention to environmentalists who opposed Monsanto. Eventually, Monsanto ceased to exist as an independent company and merged into Pharmacia.

"Understanding Change"

Although innovation is an important part of change management, leadership plus innovation does not equal change. Good ideas are not enough. You must win your followers' cooperation and commitment to your ideas. Some leaders accomplish this through coercion – but authoritarianism has serious drawbacks. Authoritarian leaders who set a tough pace and demand that subordinates keep up or leave often fail to empathize adequately with their followers. In schools, this can lead to the so-called "implementation dip" – a falloff in confidence and performance. Anxiety, fear and stress precipitate implementation dips.

Confidence and clear vision are positive qualities for authority figures, but ultimately, you must coach your followers and form partnerships with them, instead of just pushing them around. Find out why they resist change. Sometimes, resisters are merely malcontents, but often they have important insights or knowledge that you need to make the right decisions. For this reason, some organizations deliberately expose leaders to differing opinions.

"Relationships"

Relationships are the basis of leadership – yet Monsanto failed despite intense, vibrant relationships among its workers. Why? The company did not relate to its external stakeholders, such as environmentalists, who were suspicious of its activities.

Relationships that get too comfortable can be dangerous if they insulate you from criticism. Good relationships are important for implementing reorganization and restructuring – but leaders must also facilitate uncomfortable "re-culturing." For this, you need that elusive quality, emotional intelligence.

In 1987, Anthony Alvarado, superintendent of New York City's School District 2, led a remarkably successful reculturing of his organization. The initiative involved some reorganization, but it was mainly about instruction. Alvarado managed to elicit strong identification and commitment from his teachers and principals. In other words, he used relationships as the means of change.

A similar focus on relationships characterized a change initiative in the San Diego City School District. Instead of acting as autonomous units, San Diego's teachers have become members of an educational community with the shared goal of improving the lives of everyone involved.

"Knowledge Building"

Knowledge is social: it is valuable only when it becomes part of a social milieu. (For this reason, individual training and even team training don't always work.) Knowledge spreads via relationships. Yet, if people are not motivated to share knowledge, they won't do it – especially if they are part of a competitive or threatening organizational culture. Because so much important knowledge is unwritten and difficult to capture other than

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"Information… only becomes valuable in a social context."

"You would think that schools…know a lot about teaching reading, writing and mathematics – and you would be right. You would also think that accessing this information would be a top priority – and you would be wrong."

"The implementation dip is literally a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings."

"Complex, turbulent environments constantly generate messiness and reams of ideas; interacting individuals are the key to accessing and sorting out these ideas."

through face-to-face communication, you can't overestimate the importance of social ambience in workplaces. Organizations undergoing change, particularly educational institutions, must develop collaborative, cooperative and supportive cultures.

New York City's District 2, for example, emphasized intradistrict site visits and consultations. It took additional measures to change the context in which knowledge was developed and shared, including engaging consultants to work with individual teachers and groups of teachers, and emphasizing networking. In contrast, researchers at the York Region School District near Toronto found that even though individual teachers and schools were achieving breakthroughs and successes, they were not sharing what they learned. The result was a great waste of knowledge.

> "A culture of change consists of great rapidity and nonlinearity on the one hand, and equally great potential for creative breakthroughs on the other."

"Coherence Making"
Change seems chaotic. The forces of change seem centrifugal – spinning everything out of alignment. Yet consider the following biological realities:

- Equilibrium gives an organism no incentive to change.
- Threats push living things to the "edge of chaos," where they must experiment, mutate and find new responses.
- Self-organization in response to change leads to new forms of life and new responses. This self-organization seems to emerge spontaneously from apparent chaos.
- The unexpected is inevitable; the path of change is never linear. Scientists cannot direct an organism to change. They can only introduce disturbances that mimic natural forces.

However, disturbance is not good in and of itself; it must lead to a desired outcome. Many educational institutions are struggling to juggle far more change, reform and innovation than they possibly can handle. This kind of disturbance is not productive; it does not lead to coherence. Ambiguity is helpful only when it enables a higher order of clarity to emerge. When you are trying to build coherence, the most important factors to consider are:

> "Ultimately, your leadership in a culture of change will be judged as effective or ineffective not by who you are as the leader but by what leadership you produce in others."

- "Lateral accountability" – This is also known as peer support.
- "Sorting" – People within an organization collectively decide which ideas they'll pursue. They jointly ask, "Does it work?" and "Does it feed into our overall purpose and support our goals?"
- "Shared commitment" – Everyone commits to the ideas the organization adopts.

Slow and Steady Wins the Race
The old fable about the tortoise and the hare contains an important leadership lesson. Leaders who always seem to know immediately which way to go are dangerous. In contrast, the most successful change leaders are patient. They deliberate and analyze amidst ambiguity and uncertainty, in a process of "slow knowing."

About The Author

Michael Fullan is co-author of *What's Worth Fighting for in Your School* and the author of *The Change Forces* trilogy and *The New Meaning of Educational Change*.